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The Contestation of Local Democracy in Indonesia: An Evaluation of Direct Regional Elections, Regional Elections Through the Regional People's Representative Council, and the Asymmetrical Election System

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Abstract: Direct election of regional heads in Indonesia remains a prolonged policy contestation after more than two decades of implementation. High political costs, money politics, the phenomena of single candidates and political dynasties, violations of civil servant neutrality, and rising election disputes before the Constitutional Court have revived discourse on electing regional heads through regional legislative councils, along with the idea of asymmetric elections. This study comparatively analyzes these three models of regional head selection within a multidimensional framework combining theories of local democracy, the democratic rule of law, and asymmetric decentralization, and formulates recommendations for a model better suited to Indonesia's socio-political characteristics. The study employs normative legal research supported by secondary empirical data, using statutory, conceptual, and comparative approaches, operationalizing five evaluative indicators: political legitimacy, public participation, accountability, budget efficiency, and constitutional compliance. Findings show that the three models present inversely related strengths and weaknesses across these dimensions, and that the Constitutional Court consistently provides constitutional space for variation in election models within the unitary state framework and a clear legal basis. The study recommends a measured asymmetric election model as a middle path, supported by objective eligibility criteria, strengthened electoral integrity in regions retaining direct elections, and strengthened public accountability in regions adopting non-direct mechanisms, without disregarding popular sovereignty.

Keywords: Direct Regional Head Election, Indirect Regional Head Election, Asymmetric Election, Local Democracy, Asymmetric Decentralization.

INTRODUCTION

Regional head elections occupy a strategic position in the development of democracy and constitutional governance in Indonesia. They are not merely a procedural mechanism for

selecting governors, regents, and mayors, but rather an institutional instrument for generating political legitimacy, strengthening citizen participation, building local government accountability, and creating democratic legitimacy of power (Budiardjo, 2021). The position of regional heads as government administrators, development implementers, and public policy makers renders the design of regional head elections directly influential on the success of regional autonomy, the quality of local democracy, and the constitutional relationship between the central government and regional governments (Widodo, 2022; Kristiyanto, 2012; Booth, 2011; Li et al., 2025). Within the perspective of a democratic rule of law, the implementation of regional head elections constitutes an integral part of the principle of popular sovereignty (Hasibuan, 2023), as affirmed in Article 1 paragraph (3) and Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023).

The institutional design of regional head elections in Indonesia has undergone significant changes in line with the dynamics of national political history. During the New Order era, regional heads were formally elected through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) based on Law No. 5 of 1974, but the process was heavily colored by bureaucratic intervention from the central government and political elite agreements (Marijan, 2020; Nordholt, 2021; Huda, 2021; Hadiz, 2021). The 1998 Reform movement encouraged the strengthening of decentralization and gave birth to Law Number 32 of 2004, which introduced the direct regional head election mechanism as an important milestone in strengthening local democracy, reinforced by Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Asshiddiqie, 2021). Since then, direct regional head elections have been believed to enhance the political legitimacy of regional heads and deepen community participation (Choi, 2007, 2021; Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023).

However, more than two decades of their implementation have revealed recurring and systemic problems. High political costs (Hadiz, 2021), the practice of money politics that pervades nearly all stages of regional head elections (ICW, 2023; Buehler, 2023; Aspinall, 2013; Aspinall et al., 2017; Hicken, 2011 cases of regional head corruption related to political financing as reflected in the hand catching operation against South Sulawesi Governor Nurdin Abdullah in 2021 (KPK RI, 2023) social polarization as seen in the 2017 DKI Jakarta regional head election (Aspinall, 2020), the phenomenon of single candidates and political dynasties in the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections (KPU RI, 2024; Mietzner, 2024; Kompas, 2025), violations of civil servant neutrality (Bawaslu RI, 2025; CNN Indonesia, 2025), and the increasing number of election result disputes at the Constitutional Court (Tempo, 2025a; Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2025a; KPU RI, 2025), demonstrate that direct electoral participation does not automatically produce substantive democracy. Official KPU RI data recorded 37 single candidate pairs out of 545 regions holding the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections (equivalent to 6.78 percent), a nominal increase compared to 25 single candidates in the 2020 regional elections, with the majority coming from incumbent backgrounds or relatives of incumbents for example, in the Papua Barat provincial contest and the Surabaya mayoral contest (KPU RI, 2024) which reinforces indications that direct regional elections have not fully freed local democracy from the influence of oligarchy and power patronage (Mietzner, 2024; Power, 2018; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019).

These problems have revived the discourse of returning the selection of regional heads to the DPRD, which proponents believe is more budget efficient and can reduce horizontal conflict resulting from open competition (Romli, 2021). This discourse has gained political momentum toward the mid-2020s, including when President Prabowo Subianto, at the commemoration of the 61st anniversary of the Golkar Party on December 5, 2025, proposed that regional heads be elected through the DPRD on the grounds of reducing political costs and preventing democracy from being dominated by the wealthy, while comparing it to practices in several countries such as Malaysia, India, the United Kingdom, Canada, and

Australia (Beritasatu, 2025; Tempo, 2025b). This proposal was also based on fiscal efficiency arguments, citing the increase in regional budget grants for the conduct of regional head elections from approximately Rp7 trillion in 2015 to more than Rp37 trillion in 2024 (JPNN, 2025), and received support from several ruling coalition party elites (Melihat Indonesia, 2025). However, this budget efficiency argument was refuted by election organizers; the DKI Jakarta Provincial KPU, for instance, calculated that the implementation cost of the 2024 Jakarta regional head election only amounted to approximately Rp15,000 per voter per year when averaged over the term of office (Jawa Pos, 2025), while several opposition parties considered that this discourse requires deeper examination and cannot serve as a single solution (RM.id, 2024). Notwithstanding this debate, the argument for returning regional head elections to the DPRD faces strong academic criticism because Indonesia's historical experience demonstrates that indirect elections are vulnerable to domination by elite political transactions, can strengthen party oligarchy, and have the potential to shift regional head accountability from citizens to political parties or elite coalitions (Nordholt, 2021; Hadiz, 2021; Buehler, 2023; Hicken, 2011). Noor et al. (2021) emphasize that political participation by the community is the foundation of local government legitimacy, so that reduced participation risks fundamentally weakening accountability.

This debate ultimately reached the Constitutional Court through a judicial review. Four students Vendy Setiawan, Lala Komalawati, Susi Lestari, and Afifah Nabila Putri filed a petition for judicial review of Article 1 number 1 of Law Number 8 of 2015 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors as amended by Law Number 6 of 2020 (the Regional Head Election Law), which contains the phrase "directly and democratically," arguing that the formulation is ambiguous and has the potential to become an entry point for shifting the regional election mechanism from direct popular election to election through the DPRD without constitutional amendment (CNN Indonesia, 2026). In Decision Number 195/PUU-XXIV/2026 pronounced on June 29, 2026, the Constitutional Court declared the petition inadmissible on the grounds that the petitioners lacked legal standing, because factually regional head elections are still conducted directly by the people, so the constitutional injury alleged had not yet occurred or was not occurring (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2026a). Although procedural in nature (*niet ontvankelijke verklaard*), the legal considerations of this decision, which refer to the Court's stance in Decision Number 072-073/PUU-II/2004, Decision Number 69/PUU-XXII/2024, and Decision Number 110/PUU-XXIII/2025 (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2004, 2024, 2025b) remain doctrinally relevant because they affirm that the current mechanism for regional head elections is conducted directly by the people guided by universally applicable election principles, while still recognizing and respecting regional government units that have special or privileged status (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2026a). This decision simultaneously affirms that the request for separate arrangements for regions with special characteristics has not yet become a binding norm in current positive law, and therefore cannot yet serve as an object of separate judicial review. Thus, there are two complementary constitutional conclusions for this research: direct regional head elections remain the factual and statutory model of general application, while space for asymmetric variation for regions with special characteristics remains open as long as it is provided with a clear legal basis not merely as discourse or ad hoc interpretation.

Between these two poles, the concept of asymmetric regional head elections has developed as a policy alternative and constitutional discourse that accommodates the diversity of regional socio-political conditions (Pratikno, 2021; Booth, 2011; Falleti, 2005; Kusuma, 2025). Concrete examples can be found in the filling of the governor position in the Special Region of Yogyakarta based on hereditary lineage from the palace (Fatoni, 2020; Azzahro et al., 2023), the special status of local political parties in Aceh (Syaputra & Sihombing, 2020), cultural mechanisms in Papua, and special electoral formulas in DKI Jakarta. Sitabuana (2020)

affirms that asymmetric decentralization does not contradict the principle of a unitary state as long as it remains within the constitutional framework of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. Recent legal developments further reinforce the urgency of this discussion: the Constitutional Court's decision regarding the interpretation of the phrase "elected democratically" in Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia affirms that direct regional head elections remain the factual and statutory model at present, while still recognizing space for special arrangements for regions with particular distinctiveness or privilege (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023; Syaputra & Sihombing, 2020).

Theoretically, the evaluation of regional election mechanisms in this research is built upon three interconnected conceptual frameworks. First, local democracy theory distinguishes between procedural democracy and substantive democracy (Choi, 2021; Surbakti, 2020; Diamond, 2002), procedural democracy emphasizes compliance with electoral procedures, while substantive democracy emphasizes the quality of representation, accountability, and responsiveness of regional government to people's needs. Local democracy can be understood as a system that enables citizens to participate in regional political processes and oversee local power holders; in the Indonesian context, local democracy is closely related to decentralization because regional autonomy requires not only the transfer of administrative authority but also democratic legitimacy (Choi, 2007; Kristiyanto, 2012; Yusyanti, 2015). Regional head elections can be procedurally valid yet substantively weak when dominated by money politics, political dynasties, intimidation, or unequal access to candidacy (Budiardjo, 2021; Diamond, 2002; Surbakti, 2020).

Second, the theory of a democratic rule of law (*demokratische rechtsstaat*) requires that every mechanism for filling public positions must be based on constitutionality, legal certainty, and respect for citizens' political rights (Hasibuan, 2023; Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023). Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia serves as the constitutional basis for regional head elections, but the phrase "elected democratically" opens interpretive space regarding whether democratic election must always mean direct election by the people, or can also be realized through representative bodies (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023). Kusuma (2025) reinforces this reading through an original intent analysis of the constitutional framers' deliberations, contending that the term "democratically" was deliberately chosen so that it would not be confined to direct election but could also encompass selection through the DPRD. This concept is complemented by the distinction between horizontal accountability through state institutions such as parliaments, audit agencies, and the judiciary and vertical accountability through voters in periodic elections from O'Donnell (1998), used to assess the direction toward which regional head accountability actually shifts in each model. Direct regional elections in principle strengthen vertical accountability, but such accountability can be distorted when campaign costs and patronage bind regional heads to funders rather than to voters (Aspinall et al., 2017; Hicken et al., 2022). Conversely, election through the DPRD has the potential to strengthen representative mechanisms when the DPRD operates transparently and accountably, but risks shifting accountability to party elites when public oversight is weak (Hadiz, 2021; Hicken, 2011).

Third, asymmetric decentralization theory holds that the diversity of geographical, historical, and socio cultural characteristics across regions requires variation in institutional design, not merely structural uniformity (Pratikno, 2021; Booth, 2011; Falleti, 2005; Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Smoke, 2015; Li et al., 2025; Kusuma, 2025). Asymmetric decentralization refers to the recognition that different regions may require different institutional arrangements within a single state, and rejects the assumption that all regions must be governed by uniform administrative and political designs. In the Indonesian context, asymmetry is evident in the special status of Yogyakarta under Law No. 13 of 2012, the special autonomy of Aceh through Law No. 11 of 2006, the special autonomy of Papua through Law No. 21 of 2001 as amended

by Law No. 2 of 2021, and the distinctiveness of DKI Jakarta through Law No. 29 of 2007 (Syaputra & Sihombing, 2020; Yusyanti, 2015). Uniformity in the design of regional head elections indeed provides administrative convenience, but may ignore regions with distinctive historical, cultural, or institutional characteristics, while asymmetry can strengthen contextual democracy but risks creating legal uncertainty if applied without objective criteria (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023; Syaputra & Sihombing, 2020). These three frameworks are used in an integrated manner to evaluate the extent to which each model of regional head elections simultaneously fulfills the principles of substantive democracy, constitutional compliance, and accommodation of regional diversity.

Academic studies on regional head elections in Indonesia have developed rapidly, particularly in evaluating direct elections, money politics, clientelism, and electoral conflict (Khairi, 2020; Mietzner, 2020; Aspinall, 2020; Aspinall & As'ad, 2016). Studies on election through the DPRD generally focus on budget efficiency and oligarchy risks (Romli, 2021; Hadiz, 2021), while studies on asymmetric decentralization tend to discuss special regions separately (Fatoni, 2020; Azzahro et al., 2023). Previous research has made important contributions regarding direct regional elections, money politics, clientelism, and decentralization, but the discussion tends to be fragmented, and studies comprehensively comparing the three models of regional head elections within a single multidimensional analytical framework remain very limited (Yusuf, 2023). A recent doctrinal contribution by Kusuma (2025) has advanced this discourse by constructing a typology and constitutional justification for asymmetric regional elections; however, its focus remains confined to the asymmetric model alone and does not place it in systematic comparison with the direct and DPRD-based models. This research fills this gap by evaluating the three models of regional head elections within a single multidimensional framework encompassing political legitimacy, public participation, accountability (horizontal and vertical), budget efficiency, and constitutional compliance simultaneously and consistently.

Framing the debate in these terms clarifies that the central problem of this study is not merely whether direct regional elections exhibit weaknesses—a proposition that more than two decades of empirical evidence have already settled—but what institutional consequence should properly follow from those weaknesses. Two competing responses dominate the current discourse. The first treats the documented pathologies of direct elections—high political costs, money politics, single candidacies, dynastic capture, and the partiality of the State Civil Apparatus (ASN)—as sufficient justification for replacing the direct model with a uniform national return to selection through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD). The second treats those same pathologies not as grounds for abandoning direct elections wholesale, but as evidence that a single uniform electoral design cannot accommodate Indonesia's heterogeneous regional conditions, thereby pointing toward a differentiated institutional design calibrated to each region's historical, fiscal, and democratic characteristics. The problem this study addresses is therefore which of these two responses is the more defensible in normative, constitutional, and institutional terms: a wholesale substitution of the national electoral model, or an asymmetric design that varies according to regional characteristics. Positioning the weaknesses of direct elections as a diagnostic point of departure rather than as an end in themselves allows the evaluation that follows to assess not only how each model performs, but also which reform pathway best reconciles popular sovereignty, accountability, efficiency, and legal certainty under conditions of regional diversity.

The novelty of this research lies in three aspects: first, a comprehensive comparative analysis of the three models of regional head elections simultaneously rather than in fragmented fashion; second, the integration of local democracy, democratic rule of law (including horizontal-vertical accountability theory), and asymmetric decentralization perspectives as an integrated multidimensional analytical framework; and third, the incorporation of current legal

data and phenomena, including the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections, the 2025 Re-voting (PSU), and recent constitutional interpretations of Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. Based on the above description, this research aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the direct regional election system, regional election through the DPRD, and asymmetric regional election from the perspectives of local democracy, the democratic rule of law, and asymmetric decentralization, as well as to formulate recommendations for a model of regional head elections that is more effective, efficient, and suited to Indonesia's socio-political characteristics. These research objectives must be addressed in the discussion section and concluded in the final part of this article.

METHOD

This study employs a normative legal research methodology, supported by secondary empirical data. The normative approach is applied to examine regulations, legal concepts, and democratic principles pertaining to the regional head election system (Asshiddiqie, 2021; Marzuki, 2017), while empirical data reinforces this normative analysis through an examination of documented local political phenomena drawn from official state institutional reports, prior research findings, and verified media coverage. This combined approach accords with the perspective of Ibrahim (2006), who contends that normative legal research can be enriched with socio-empirical data to produce a more comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis.

Three principal approaches are adopted in this study. The statute approach is utilized to analyze Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law No. 5 of 1974, Law No. 22 of 1999, Law No. 32 of 2004, Law No. 12 of 2008, Law No. 11 of 2006 concerning Aceh Governance, Law No. 13 of 2012 concerning the Special Status of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Law No. 21 of 2001 in conjunction with Law No. 2 of 2021 concerning Papua Special Autonomy, Law No. 29 of 2007 concerning the DKI Jakarta Provincial Government, Law No. 23 of 2014, Law No. 10 of 2016, as well as relevant Constitutional Court decisions (Fajar & Achmad, 2015). The conceptual approach is employed to operationalize the notions of local democracy (Choi, 2021; Surbakti, 2020), horizontal and vertical accountability (O'Donnell, 1998), asymmetric decentralization (Pratikno, 2021; Booth, 2011; Azzahro et al., 2023), regional autonomy, and sound local governance (Syamsuddin, 2022). The comparative approach is deployed to contrast the characteristics, advantages, and shortcomings of the three models of regional elections, drawing on criteria such as local democracy, budget efficiency, accountability, public participation, and regional political stability, while also drawing comparisons with asymmetric decentralization experiences in other countries, including Spain and the United Kingdom (Hadiz, 2021; Romli, 2021; Li et al., 2025).

Legal materials are categorized into three types: primary legal materials, consisting of legislation, Constitutional Court rulings concerning regional elections and disputes over regional head election results (PHPU Kada), as well as official documents from the General Elections Commission (KPU RI), the Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu RI), and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK RI); secondary legal materials, encompassing indexed national and international academic journals, scholarly books, and independent institutional reports, with a preference for publications issued between 2020 and 2025; and tertiary legal materials, including legal dictionaries, encyclopedias, and verified online news media. Data collection is undertaken through library research, involving the systematic inventory, classification, and analysis of legal sources and academic literature (Fajar & Achmad, 2015). The analytical technique applied is descriptive analytical in nature, conducted through legal interpretation and comparative analysis across the various regional election models (Marzuki, 2017).

To guarantee analytical consistency, this study operationalizes five evaluative indicators that are applied uniformly to each of the three regional election models: (1) political legitimacy, measured by the source of authority for filling the regional head position; (2) public participation, measured by the degree of direct citizen engagement in the election process; (3) accountability, measured by the direction of the regional head's accountability whether to the people, to political parties, or to customary/religious institutions with reference to the horizontal versus vertical accountability distinction (O'Donnell, 1998); (4) budget efficiency, measured by the burden of political costs and administrative expenses; and (5) constitutional compliance, measured by conformity with Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia and relevant Constitutional Court decisions. These five indicators serve as the foundation for constructing Table 2 in the findings and discussion section, thereby ensuring that the comparison across models is conducted in a consistent, measurable, and non-fragmented manner.

Because this study frames the exercise as a comparative evaluation, the basis on which each model is judged must be made explicit so that the results are not read as the authors' subjective interpretation. Accordingly, each of the five indicators is assessed against a three-level ordinal rubric strong, moderate, or weak whose anchors are defined *ex ante* and applied uniformly to all three models. The classification assigned to every cell is not asserted but grounded in a triangulation of three categories of evidence: (a) the normative-statutory basis, comprising constitutional provisions, statutes, and Constitutional Court decisions that regulate or legitimize the mechanism; (b) documented empirical indicators drawn from official institutional data issued by KPU RI, Bawaslu RI, KPK RI, and Mahkamah Konstitusi RI; and (c) established scholarly findings on the mechanism's demonstrated performance. A model is rated strong on a given indicator when its statutory basis is firm and the empirical and scholarly evidence converge in a favourable direction, moderate when the evidence is mixed or conditional upon institutional prerequisites, and weak when the statutory basis is contested or the empirical record documents recurrent failure. This procedure follows the logic of structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005), in which the same set of theoretically derived questions is posed to each case so that the resulting judgments are systematic and mutually comparable rather than *ad hoc*. Table 1 sets out the operational definition and the assessment basis for each indicator, while Table 2 in the following section presents the resulting comparative judgments.

Table 1. Operational Definitions and Assessment Basis of the Five Evaluative Indicators

Evaluative Indicator	Operational Definition	Basis of Assessment (Evidence Triangulated)	Rating Anchors
Political legitimacy	Source of authority for filling the regional head position and its derivation from popular will.	UUD 1945 Art. 18(4); Law No. 32/2004, 23/2014, 10/2016; MK decisions; legitimacy literature (Choi, 2021; Asshiddiqie, 2021).	Strong: authority derived directly from voters. Moderate: mediated but constitutionally valid. Weak: contested or elite-controlled.
Public participation	Degree of direct citizen engagement in selecting the regional head.	KPU RI turnout and candidacy data; participation and clientelism studies (Aspinall, 2020; Surbakti, 2020).	Strong: broad direct participation. Moderate: indirect/representative participation. Weak: participation minimal or transactional.
Accountability (horizontal/vertical)	Direction of the regional head's accountability toward	MK and KPK RI records; accountability and clientelism	Strong: clear, undistorted

	voters, parties, or customary/religious bodies (O'Donnell, 1998).	scholarship (Hadiz, 2021; Hicken, 2011).	accountability. Moderate: mixed or conditional. Weak: accountability captured by elites/funders.
Budget efficiency	Burden of political costs and administrative expenditure entailed by the mechanism.	APBD/APBN allocation data (KPU RI, 2024); cost analyses (Romli, 2021; JPNN, 2025).	Strong: low aggregate cost. Moderate: cost reduced but displaced. Weak: very high political and administrative cost.
Constitutional compliance	Conformity with Art. 18(4) UUD 1945 and relevant Constitutional Court decisions.	UUD 1945; MK decisions incl. 195/PUU-XXIV/2026 and prior jurisprudence (Sitabuana, 2020; Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023).	Strong: firm constitutional footing. Moderate: permissible subject to safeguards/codification. Weak: constitutionally contested.

Source: Constructed by the researchers, 2026.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Direct Regional Head Elections: High Legitimacy Amidst Political Costs and Integrity Risks

Direct regional head elections occupy a pivotal place in Indonesia's local democracy, as they generate political legitimacy derived directly from the popular will (Choi, 2007, 2021). Since their introduction through Law No. 32 of 2004, this mechanism has produced local leaders who are politically and symbolically closer to the citizenry as exemplified by the 2005 Surakarta mayoral election (Aspinall, 2020) and has reinforced popular sovereignty at the subnational level by curbing the formal monopoly of political parties and Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) elites in determining regional heads (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023; Booth, 2011). From the standpoint of local democracy, direct elections excel in participation and legitimacy because citizens act as direct participants rather than merely being represented by party elites in the electoral process.

Nevertheless, these democratic virtues come with serious structural shortcomings in terms of local government effectiveness. The exorbitant financial costs of campaigns (Hadiz, 2021) compel candidates to rely on sponsors, political brokers, or transactional networks, with the result that once elected, regional heads are formally accountable to voters yet materially bound to their financial backers a pattern that O'Donnell (1998) would characterize as a distortion of vertical accountability. This dynamic, in turn, has driven a number of regional heads into corruption cases related to campaign financing, as reflected in the 2021 hand-catching operation against Nurdin Abdullah by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) (KPK RI, 2023). The Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW) reports that money politics pervades virtually every phase of regional elections, potentially producing leaders who are more beholden to funding interests than to the public good (Buehler, 2023; Aspinall et al., 2017). When voter support is secured through material inducements, political participation devolves into short-term transactional exchange rather than programmatic evaluation—a condition that does not automatically invalidate the procedural legality of the election, but does undermine the normative foundation of substantive democratic representation (Diamond, 2002; Surbakti, 2020).

The 2024 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections also brought new concerns to the fore, notably the rising incidence of single-candidate contests driven by high nomination thresholds and the dominance of political party coalitions (KPU RI, 2024; Kompas, 2025). Official data

from the General Elections Commission (KPU) recorded 37 single-candidate pairs out of 545 electoral regions (equivalent to 6.78 percent), a nominal increase from 25 in 2020, with the majority coming from incumbents or their relatives—as seen in the Papua Barat provincial contest and the Surabaya mayoral race (KPU RI, 2024). This phenomenon reinforces indications of political dynasties, suggesting that direct elections have not fully disentangled local democracy from the grip of oligarchy and power patronage (Mietzner, 2024; Power, 2018), while also demonstrating that direct citizen participation remains insufficient when access to candidacy continues to be controlled by narrow political networks (Aspinall & As'ad, 2016). The neutrality of civil servants has likewise emerged as a serious concern: the Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu) documented thousands of alleged violations of civil service neutrality during the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections, ranging from campaign involvement to the misuse of state facilities (CNN Indonesia, 2025), revealing the blurring of boundaries between public administration and electoral interests (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019).

In terms of constitutional compliance, direct regional head elections rest on a firm foundation in Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Asshiddiqie, 2021), and recent constitutional interpretations have further solidified this position. In Decision Number 195/PUU-XXIV/2026, the Constitutional Court dismissed a petition challenging the phrase "directly and democratically" in Article 1 number 1 of the Regional Head Election Law on grounds of the petitioners' lack of legal standing; nevertheless, the Court's legal reasoning reaffirmed that regional head elections are still conducted directly by the people under generally applicable electoral principles, while simultaneously recognizing and respecting regional government units that possess special or privileged status (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2026a). Chief Justice Suhartoyo underscored that this factual state of affairs actually demonstrates that the petitioners had suffered neither actual nor potential constitutional harm, since the prevailing model of direct elections remains unchanged (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2026a). This decision drew upon the Court's consistent stance in Decision Number 072-073/PUU-II/2004, Decision Number 69/PUU-XXII/2024, and Decision Number 110/PUU-XXIII/2025 (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2004, 2024, 2025b), which cumulatively reveal a stable line of jurisprudence: direct elections constitute the general norm applicable to all regions, while separate arrangements for regions with special or privileged status remain permissible only if first codified as positive legal norms—not merely as policy discourse or political proposals such as those that had been floated regarding selection through the DPRD (Beritasatu, 2025). From the perspective of this study's five evaluative indicators, Decision Number 195/PUU-XXIV/2026 accordingly reinforces the constitutional legitimacy of direct elections as the factual model, while simultaneously foreclosing any nationwide shift in the electoral mechanism absent a statutory amendment, though it does not preclude the implementation of asymmetric elections in specific regions provided a clear legal basis exists. Nonetheless, the high volume of electoral result disputes remains a serious caveat regarding the integrity of election administration. The Constitutional Court resolved 310 petitions concerning Regional Head Election Result Disputes (PHPU Kada) from the 2024 cycle; of the 40 cases examined substantively, 26 were partially granted, leading to orders for Re-voting (PSU) in 24 regions including Papua Province, Serang Regency, and Tasikmalaya Regency on account of violations such as state official bias, voter roll manipulation, and the disqualification of ineligible candidates (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2025a; KPU RI, 2025). The magnitude of these revoting orders indicates that the procedural legitimacy of direct elections has not fully translated into corresponding integrity on the ground (Tempo, 2025a), and reinforces the view that electoral quality depends heavily on the integrity of election administrators, state apparatus neutrality, and the effectiveness of law enforcement, rather than solely on the electoral model itself (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023).

The steep political costs associated with direct elections also place a significant burden on public finances, through both regional budgets (APBD) and state budget (APBN) allocations for election administration. The 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections, which involved 1,553 candidate pairs across 37 provinces, 415 regencies, and 93 cities (KPU RI, 2024), required enormous operational expenditures, compounded by additional costs for conducting re-voting in 24 regions in early 2025 (Mahkamah Konstitusi RI, 2025a; KPU RI, 2025). This dual burden political costs for candidates and administrative costs for the state constitutes a primary argument for those advocating a reassessment of the direct election mechanism, even though it must be balanced against the risk that reducing direct citizen involvement may diminish the political legitimacy of regional heads (Choi, 2021).

Regional Elections Through the Regional People's Representative Council: Budget Efficiency with the Risk of Shifting Accountability

The proposal to revert to Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD)-based selection of regional heads is founded upon arguments of fiscal efficiency, administrative simplification, and reduced horizontal conflict arising from open competition (Romli, 2021). Since political competition becomes concentrated within the representative assembly rather than being mobilized directly among the populace, this mechanism theoretically curbs the political expenses that have historically constituted a primary driver of regional head corruption. In theoretical terms as well, indirect elections can still be regarded as democratic provided the DPRD operates transparently, representatively, accountably, and is insulated from closed-door political transactions consistent with O'Donnell's (1998) model of horizontal accountability, wherein responsibility is exercised through representative institutions rather than directly by the electorate.

Examined through the lens of local democracy, however, Indonesia's historical experience under the New Order regime, governed by Law Number 5 of 1974, demonstrates that DPRD based elections were highly vulnerable to domination by elite political dealings and central government intervention, as reflected in the 1998 Central Java gubernatorial election (Marijan, 2020). During that period, the DPRD functioned more as an instrument for legitimizing central authority than as an autonomous regional representative body, given the absence of a healthy party system or independent public oversight (Nordholt, 2021; Huda, 2021). This state of affairs rendered regional heads more responsive to the interests of the central government and political parties than to the needs of their constituents.

The principal deficiency of this model lies in the potential shift of accountability away from citizens and toward political parties, DPRD factions, or the elite coalitions that dominate the selection process. Buehler (2023) contends that clientelism and elite capture actually intensify when electoral mechanisms do not involve direct popular participation, while Noor et al. (2021) demonstrate that political participation by the citizenry constitutes the very foundation of effective regional government legitimacy. DPRD based elections also carry the potential to reinforce oligarchic bargaining: because the number of decision makers is smaller, the selection process becomes more susceptible to vote trading and clandestine political arrangements, meaning that reduced public campaign costs do not automatically abolish political expenses but rather merely relocate them from mass competition to elite negotiation (Hadiz, 2021; Hicken, 2011; Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). From the dimension of constitutional compliance, DPRD-based elections remain defensible, as the Constitutional Court has held that the phrase "elected democratically" in Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution does not exclusively mandate direct elections (Sitabuana, 2020); nevertheless, the risks of weakened popular accountability and reinforced party oligarchy (Hadiz, 2021) render this model less than ideal if applied uniformly without supplementary oversight mechanisms such as open voting, public hearings, and anti-corruption monitoring.

International comparisons reveal that the selection of regional heads through local legislative bodies is not a phenomenon unique to Indonesia. Several European municipalities employ indirect election mechanisms with relative stability, supported by more institutionalized party systems and a political culture that upholds representative ethics (Li et al., 2025). However, the application of comparable mechanisms in Indonesia during the New Order period was not underpinned by a healthy party system or independent public scrutiny. This comparative perspective underscores that the success of DPRD based regional elections depends critically on institutional prerequisites DPRD independence, transparency in internal selection processes, and public participation in oversight which, to date, have not been fully realized within Indonesia's local political context. For this reason, DPRD based selection should not be treated as a uniform national substitute for direct elections, but rather as a limited option that must be accompanied by rigorous transparency and accountability safeguards.

Asymmetric Regional Head Elections: Accommodating Diversity with Standardization Challenges

Asymmetric regional head elections emerge as a response to the diversity of socio-political conditions, democratic capacities, and cultural characteristics across regions that cannot be adequately addressed by a uniform electoral model (Pratikno, 2021; Booth, 2011; Falleti, 2005). This approach proceeds from the principle that certain regions may require distinct institutional mechanisms owing to historical, cultural, geographical, political, or administrative capacity factors, and that within a diverse archipelagic state, institutional uniformity does not invariably produce democratic equity (Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Smoke, 2015).

The most concrete instance is observable in the Special Region of Yogyakarta (DIY), where the governor and vice-governor are appointed on the basis of hereditary succession from the Yogyakarta Sultanate and Pakualaman Duchy under Law Number 13 of 2012 a practice that has proven relatively effective in preserving regional political stability while simultaneously maintaining local cultural identity (Fatoni, 2020; Azzahro et al., 2023). Similar distinctiveness is evident in Aceh's system under Law Number 11 of 2006, which opens space for local political parties, indicating that the asymmetric decentralization framework possesses strong legal precedent within Indonesian constitutional practice (Syaputra & Sihombing, 2020). In Papua and Papua Barat Provinces, special provisions are governed by Law Number 21 of 2001 as amended by Law Number 2 of 2021 concerning Papua Special Autonomy, which among other things accommodates the "noken" voting method (customary consensus/acclamation) for certain areas with distinctive geographical and socio-cultural conditions, and establishes the Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) as a cultural representative body for indigenous Papuans that provides input in the regional head candidacy process demonstrating that asymmetric decentralization in Papua pertains not only to electoral procedures but also to affirming the rights of indigenous communities (Kompas, 2022). Another distinctive case is found in DKI Jakarta Province under Law Number 29 of 2007, which sets a gubernatorial election victory threshold requiring more than 50 percent of valid votes; should no candidate pair reach this threshold in the first round, a second round is conducted between the two pairs with the highest vote totals as occurred in the 2017 DKI Jakarta election, which proceeded to two rounds (Kompas, 2022). This diversity of practices in Yogyakarta, Aceh, Papua, and Jakarta reinforces the proposition that asymmetric decentralization is not an isolated exception but rather an established pattern within Indonesian constitutional governance for accommodating the differing historical, cultural, and geographical characteristics of various regions (Huda, 2021; Pratikno, 2021).

International experience further strengthens the argument that asymmetric decentralization is a common practice in both unitary states and quasi-federal structures. Spain

operates a system of *comunidades autónomas* with varying levels of authority across regions, wherein Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia enjoy broader powers than other territories on account of historical and cultural considerations (Li et al., 2025). The United Kingdom likewise applies asymmetric devolution to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland with non-uniform degrees of authority, while England itself does not possess an equivalent regional parliament. Both examples confirm that variegated institutional designs for subnational governance are not anomalies, but rather rational responses to the diversity of historical, cultural, and political conditions within a given territory, all while maintaining national unity (Li et al., 2025; Booth, 2011).

From the perspective of local democracy, asymmetric regional head elections hold the potential to deliver more contextually substantive democracy by taking into account historical characteristics and regional needs (Surbakti, 2020), in contrast to mere procedural democracy that risks becoming trapped in formal competition devoid of substantive content (Choi, 2021). The primary advantage resides in contextual responsiveness: rather than imposing a single model nationwide, asymmetry permits electoral designs tailored to local characteristics, such that regions with historical legitimacy or special autonomy status may adopt different mechanisms, while those with robust democratic competition and institutional capacity may retain direct elections. In terms of constitutional compliance, Sitabuana (2020) affirms that asymmetric decentralization does not contravene the unitary state principle as long as the variations adopted remain within the constitutional framework of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia.

The principal challenge confronting this model lies in the absence of objective and measurable criteria for determining which regions are eligible for a particular electoral variation. Without clear standards, asymmetric regional elections may be perceived as arbitrary, politically motivated, or discriminatory, and may generate legal uncertainty should a region demand special treatment without a strong historical, constitutional, or institutional basis (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023; Syaputra & Sihombing, 2020). A second challenge pertains to accountability: when a region employs a special mechanism, the direction of the regional head's accountability must remain unequivocal, and asymmetry must not be exploited to weaken public oversight or insulate local elites from democratic control. To date, studies on asymmetric regional elections have tended to remain descriptive in nature, lacking a comprehensive evaluative framework for formulating such eligibility criteria (Azzahro et al., 2023; Yusuf, 2023).

Comparative Analysis Across Regional Election Models

A comparative analysis of the three models reveals that none is absolutely superior across all evaluative dimensions. Direct regional elections excel in legitimacy and participation but are deficient in budget efficiency and remain vulnerable to money politics, single candidate contests, political dynasties, and electoral disputes; Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) based elections perform well in budget efficiency and administrative simplicity but are weak in participation and susceptible to elite oligarchy; while asymmetric regional elections hold the potential to accommodate regional diversity in the most contextually appropriate manner, yet still require objective criteria to prevent legal uncertainty and unequal treatment across regions. An initial attempt to supply such objective criteria appears in Kusuma (2025), who maps four asymmetric typologies political, special administrative, general administrative, and political administrative according to each region's underlying needs. These findings reinforce the view of Yusuf (2023) that evaluation of the regional election system must be undertaken in an integrated fashion and cannot be separated from the concurrent contexts of the democratic rule of law and asymmetric decentralization. The debate over the electoral model should not, therefore, be framed in binary terms between direct elections and DPRD based selection, because such a binary framing oversimplifies Indonesia's regional diversity

and disregards the established constitutional experience of asymmetric decentralization. The core issue is not which model is most democratic in the abstract, but rather which model can simultaneously generate legitimacy, accountability, efficiency, and legal certainty under varying regional conditions.

Table 2. Comparative Assessment of Direct Regional Head Elections, Regional People's Representative Council Based Regional Head Elections, and Asymmetric Regional Head Elections Based on Dimensions of Local Democracy, Regional Government Effectiveness, and Constitutional Compliance

Evaluation Dimension	Direct Regional Head Elections	Regional People's Representative Council Based Regional Head Elections	Asymmetric Regional Head Elections
Legitimacy and Participation	High; citizens vote directly and formally express popular sovereignty (Choi, 2021)	Lower; citizens do not vote directly, legitimacy depends on Regional People's Representative Assembly credibility and is vulnerable to elite domination (Marijan, 2020)	Variable; depends on local mechanisms, historical foundation, and public acceptance (Pratikno, 2021)
Accountability (Horizontal/Vertical)	Vertical accountability is formally strong but can be distorted by patronage and campaign costs (O'Donnell, 1998; Aspinall et al., 2017)	Risks shifting toward quasi-horizontal accountability—to parties, factions, or elite coalitions—when public oversight is weak (Hadiz, 2021)	Depends on the legal design and public oversight mechanisms established in each region
Political Costs and Budget Efficiency	Very high, encompassing campaign costs, administrative expenses, and potential Re-voting (PSU) costs (Hadiz, 2021; KPU RI, 2024)	More administratively efficient, but political costs may shift to elite negotiations (Romli, 2021)	Varies according to the institutional design applied in each region
Empirical Examples	37 single-candidate contests out of 545 regions; 24 regions required Re-voting (PSU) from 40 Regional Head Election Result Dispute (PHPU Kada) cases in 2024–2025 (KPU RI, 2024; MK RI, 2025a)	1998 Central Java gubernatorial election during the New Order era (Marijan, 2020)	Special Region of Yogyakarta (Law No. 13/2012); Aceh (Law No. 11/2006); Papua—noken customary voting & Papuan People's Assembly (MRP) (Law No. 21/2001 jo. Law No. 2/2021); DKI Jakarta—50%+ victory threshold (UU No. 29/2007)
Constitutional Compliance	Firmly grounded in Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia as the current factual model (Asshiddiqie, 2021; Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023)	Permissible according to the Constitutional Court as long as "elected democratically" is not interpreted as exclusively direct, though additional safeguards are needed (Sitabuana, 2020)	Permissible for special/privileged regions, but requires a statutory basis and clear objective criteria

Source: Compiled by the researcher from various legal, institutional, and academic sources, 2026.

Table 2 succinctly illustrates that the superiority of any given model on one particular dimension tends to be inversely related to its performance on other dimensions. Consequently,

applying a single model uniformly across the entirety of Indonesia carries the risk of neglecting the diversity of socio-political characteristics among regions, while simultaneously sacrificing certain democratic values that could, in fact, be accommodated concurrently through a more differentiated institutional design.

Recommendations for a Measured Asymmetric Regional Election Model

Grounded in the foregoing analysis, this study recommends the implementation of a measured asymmetric regional election model as a middle ground approach. This model does not abolish direct elections as the general rule, nor does it uniformly revert to selection through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD). Instead, it offers a differentiated approach in which electoral mechanisms may vary across regions, provided they satisfy clear legal, democratic, and institutional criteria. This model encompasses three interrelated core elements.

First, it is necessary to formulate objective eligibility criteria grounded in historical indicators (special or privileged status), regional fiscal capacity, local democracy indices, geographical complexity, and institutional readiness. This criterion resonates with Kusuma (2025), who operationalizes the Human Development Index and regional fiscal capacity to classify regions into readiness tiers that determine whether elections are conducted directly or through the DPRD. These criteria would serve as a transparent and accountable foundation for determining which regions may adopt variations in their electoral mechanisms, thereby preventing inter regional jealousy or legal uncertainty. Second, for regions that continue to employ direct elections, a comprehensive strengthening of electoral integrity is required: campaign finance transparency, participatory oversight by civil society, stricter electoral law enforcement against money politics, improvements to party nomination regulations to curb the incidence of single candidates and political dynasties, and firm action against violations of State Civil Apparatus (ASN) neutrality. Third, for regions that adopt DPRD-based mechanisms or asymmetric arrangements, it is necessary to strengthen public accountability mechanisms for regional heads including, among other measures, open voting within the DPRD, public vetting of candidates, transparency in regional budget management, periodic public consultations, performance evaluations, and public access to legal review mechanisms to ensure that accountability is not diminished even when direct citizen participation is reduced.

The pertinent question, however, is not the mere enumeration of these criteria but how they translate into an actual determination of a region's eligibility. This study therefore specifies an operational procedure in which each criterion is converted into a measurable indicator, assigned an illustrative data source and a classification threshold, and then combined through an explicit decision rule. Table 3 sets out this operationalization.

Table 3. Operationalization of the Eligibility Criteria for a Measured Asymmetric Regional Election Model

Eligibility Criterion	Operational Indicator	Illustrative Data Source	Classification	Function in the Eligibility Decision
Historical / constitutional distinctiveness	Existence of a statutory special/privileged status or a documented customary governance institution.	Laws No. 13/2012, 11/2006, 21/2001 jo. 2/2021, 29/2007; MRP and customary records.	Present / Absent	Threshold gate: only regions passing this test may enter the special-asymmetric track; its absence closes that track and defaults the region to direct elections.
Fiscal capacity	Regional fiscal capacity index and	Ministry of Finance Regional	High / Medium / Low	Calibrating: indicates whether a region can sustain the

	degree of PAD self-sufficiency.	Fiscal Capacity Map (PMK No. 97/2025); PAD-to-APBD ratio.		recurrent cost of direct elections or would materially benefit from a lower-cost mechanism.
Local democracy index	Sub-national Indonesian Democracy Index (IDI) score and electoral-integrity record.	Indonesian Democracy Index (BPS, 2025); Bawaslu violation data; PHPU Kada outcomes.	High / Medium / Low	Calibrating: high performance supports retaining direct elections; persistently low scores trigger integrity-strengthening, not a switch of model.
Geographical complexity	Terrain, dispersion, and accessibility of the electoral territory.	BPS geographic data; KPU logistics reports.	High / Medium / Low	Calibrating: high complexity may justify customary/consensus mechanisms (e.g., noken) or logistical adaptation rather than uniform procedures.
Institutional readiness	Capacity of the DPRD, party institutionalization, and oversight infrastructure.	Bawaslu and DPRD performance data; party-system indicators.	Ready / Partly ready / Not ready	Calibrating: a DPRD-based or hybrid mechanism is admissible only where readiness and functioning oversight safeguards are demonstrably present.

Source: Constructed by the researchers, 2026.

The determination of eligibility does not rest on any single criterion in isolation but on their cumulative configuration, governed by a sequential decision rule. Direct election operates as the default track for all regions, consistent with the constitutional position affirmed in Decision Number 195/PUU-XXIV/2026. A region may enter the special asymmetric track only if it first passes the historical constitutional gate that is, it possesses a statutory special or privileged status or a documented customary governance institution because this threshold prevents asymmetry from being claimed on grounds of political convenience alone (Al-Fatih & Nur, 2023; Sitabuana, 2020). Fiscal capacity, the local democracy index, geographical complexity, and institutional readiness then operate as calibrating criteria that determine which specific variation is appropriate: a region with high geographical complexity and a recognized customary institution may adopt consensus-based mechanisms; a region with low fiscal capacity but adequate institutional readiness and functioning oversight safeguards may be considered for a limited DPRD based mechanism; whereas a region with a high local democracy index and strong electoral integrity should retain direct elections irrespective of fiscal considerations, since the diagnostic aim is to preserve, not erode, substantive democratic quality. Crucially, a low local democracy index is treated as a trigger for strengthening electoral integrity rather than as a licence to remove direct elections, thereby foreclosing any use of asymmetry to insulate weakly accountable elites from democratic control (Buehler, 2023; Hadiz, 2021). This decision logic parallels the tiered readiness classification proposed by Kusuma (2025), while extending it from a two way (direct versus DPRD) sorting into a three track framework that also accommodates customary and special autonomy variations. The resulting determination is thus rule based, evidence anchored, and reviewable, which is precisely what distinguishes a measured asymmetric design from arbitrary or politically motivated differentiation.

This measured asymmetric model also requires its own distinct statutory framework, as the expansion of asymmetric regional elections cannot rest solely on political discourse or ad hoc interpretation. An ideal national regulation would establish the permitted model types, regional eligibility criteria, approval procedures, accountability mechanisms, and periodic

evaluations, thereby creating legal certainty and preventing potential constitutional disputes in the future. This recommendation aligns with the principle that popular sovereignty may be realized through a variety of institutional mechanisms, provided they remain within the framework of a democratic rule of law and the unitary state principle (Sitabuana, 2020; Pratikno, 2021).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings of this research enrich the discourse on the relationship between institutional electoral design and the quality of local democracy, demonstrating that substantive democracy is not necessarily synonymous with direct citizen involvement at every stage of the electoral process (Surbakti, 2020; Choi, 2021; Diamond, 2002). The contribution of this study lies in its affirmation that the quality of local democracy is determined more by the combination of procedural legitimacy, electoral integrity, and clarity of accountability direction (both horizontal and vertical, following O'Donnell's, 1998 framework) than by the electoral model alone. This implication is relevant for the development of asymmetric decentralization theory (Pratikno, 2021; Booth, 2011; Falleti, 2005), which has thus far been discussed largely in the context of historically distinct regions; however, this research demonstrates that the same principle may be extended as an evaluative framework for other regions with varying institutional capacities and socio political conditions.

On a practical level, this research offers implications for policymakers (the Ministry of Home Affairs, the General Elections Commission, and the People's Representative Council) in designing future revisions to regional election regulations, particularly concerning the formulation of objective criteria for determining regions eligible to adopt variant electoral mechanisms. For election administrators (the General Elections Commission and the Election Supervisory Body), this research underscores the importance of strengthening participatory oversight and electoral law enforcement, especially regarding ASN neutrality, which remains a recurring vulnerability in every electoral cycle (Bawaslu RI, 2025). For regional governments, this research serves as a reference for strengthening public accountability mechanisms that do not depend solely on the electoral model, but also on reinforcing the oversight capacity of the DPRD, civil society participation, and transparency in regional budget management.

Research Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations that warrant open disclosure. First, this research employs a normative legal method supported by secondary empirical data; it does not incorporate primary data such as public perception surveys or in-depth interviews with election administrators at the regional level, which could provide additional perspectives on public acceptance of each electoral model. Second, the comparative analysis in this study is qualitative descriptive in nature, based on conceptually operationalized criteria, and has not yet produced quantitative measurement instruments (composite indices) that policymakers could directly employ to assess a region's eligibility for asymmetric arrangements. Third, the empirical data utilized is limited to the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Head Elections and the Revoting processes that continued into early 2025, and thus cannot capture further dynamics that may emerge following the inauguration of regional heads resulting from the Revoting, nor the latest legal developments. These limitations open avenues for more comprehensive subsequent research, whether through mixed methods approaches, longitudinal studies, or the development of a composite eligibility index for asymmetric regional elections.

CONCLUSION

Returning to the central question whether the documented weaknesses of direct regional elections justify replacing the national electoral model or instead call for a differentiated institutional design this study argues for the latter. The comparative evaluation across political legitimacy, participation, accountability, budget efficiency, and constitutional compliance shows that no single model is superior on every dimension; rather, each model's strength on one dimension tends to be offset by weakness on another. That inverse relationship is decisive, because it means the pathologies of direct elections cannot be cured by substituting one uniform model for another: a nationwide return to DPRD based selection would trade the participatory legitimacy of direct elections for precisely the accountability and oligarchy risks that Indonesia's New Order experience has already demonstrated. The problem, in short, is not the direct model as such but the uniform application of any single model across profoundly heterogeneous regions.

It follows that the defensible response is neither to defend direct elections uncritically nor to nationalize DPRD based selection, but to adopt a measured asymmetric design in which the electoral mechanism is calibrated to regional characteristics through explicit, rule-based eligibility criteria. This position is not merely normatively attractive; it is constitutionally grounded. Decision Number 195/PUU-XXIV/2026, read together with the Court's consistent jurisprudence, establishes two complementary propositions that jointly define the permissible reform space: direct election remains the factual and general statutory norm that cannot be displaced nationwide through ad hoc interpretation, while variation for regions with special or privileged status remains constitutionally open provided it is codified through a clear legal basis. A measured asymmetric model is the institutional design that occupies exactly this space.

The credibility of such a model, however, depends on converting 'regional characteristics' from a rhetorical justification into an operational and reviewable determination. The contribution of this study is to specify that conversion: a sequential decision rule in which direct election is the default, a historical-constitutional threshold gates entry to the special-asymmetric track, and fiscal capacity, the local democracy index, geographical complexity, and institutional readiness calibrate the specific variation while weak democratic performance triggers integrity-strengthening rather than the removal of direct elections. It is this rule-based, evidence-anchored logic, codified in a dedicated statutory framework, that separates a measured asymmetric design from arbitrary or politically motivated differentiation and that preserves popular sovereignty even where participation is institutionally mediated.

The broader implication is theoretical as well as practical: the quality of local democracy is determined less by the electoral model in the abstract than by the fit between institutional design and regional conditions, coupled with the integrity of the process and the clarity of accountability. Future research should therefore advance from the classificatory framework offered here toward a validated composite eligibility index and toward primary-data testing of public acceptance, so that the measured asymmetric model can be operationalized by policymakers with the precision that legal certainty and democratic equity jointly demand.

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